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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have provided evidence that the early childhood language environment, especially teacher language, is an important influence on children's social, cognitive, and linguistic development. This study compared preschool teachers' verbal interaction with children with disabilities, children using English as a second language, and typically-developing peers at an inclusive university-based preschool. Participating in the study were 43 girls and 48 boys ranging in age from 24 to 61 months. Twelve children had a diagnosed disability, and 14 used English as a second language (ESL), with no overlap between the groups. Data on rate and content of teacher-child interaction were collected during classroom observations. Findings indicated that teachers had significantly fewer transactional interactions, fewer expressive interactions, and less positive affect with ESL children than with English speaking children. The ESL children gained significantly fewer positive child responses than English speaking children. Teachers had significantly fewer one-way interactions with children with disabilities than with typical children. Children with disabilities ignored significantly fewer initiations than children without disabilities. It was concluded that language environments were different for children based upon their native language and the presence of a disability. (KB)

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A Varied Social Experience for Children with Diverse Language and Ability

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Abstract

Children develop social and communicative skills through language in early childhood settings. This study found teacher support for English as Second Language (ESL) children was significantly different in many ways, while few differences were found for children with disabilities. Implications for teacher training and support for diverse student populations, particularly ESL children are examined.

A Varied Social Experience for Children with Diverse Language and Ability

Early childhood classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. This reflects the cultural and ethnic shift in the population of the United States (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997) as well as the movement toward inclusive classrooms where children with disabilities are educated in the same classroom with their age appropriate typical peers (Sage & Burrello, 1994).

Language is viewed as essential to the development of children's social and communicative skills (Hanson, et. al, 1997). Increasingly diverse classrooms lead to greater variation in language within the preschool classroom. Language is a primary focus of development in young children. Language development serves as a marker of typical development and is a vehicle for developing social skills in the preschool setting. Children for whom English is a Second Language (ESL) may be at risk. Children in bilingual settings are at risk for never fully learning either language (Barrera, 1993; Hanson, et. al, 1997; NAEYC, 1996).

Disabilities may be language related, resulting in problems with expressive and/or receptive language. These language deficits can lead to problems with the development of social competence for children (Guralnick, et. al, 1996). A goal of many preschool programs is to increase child social skills. Preschool programs that provide services to children with disabilities in an inclusive setting provide age appropriate role models and increase the diversity of the classroom.

Currently there is limited research in the literature addressing the interaction of disability and variation in language between home and school (Hanson, et. al, 1997) with child outcomes. Previous research indicates that characteristics of the early childhood language environment, specifically teacher language, is an important influence on the social, cognitive, and linguistic development of children (McCartney, 1984; Phillips, McCartney, & Scarr, 1987). It remains unclear, however, whether the language environments provided to diverse children (i.e., those with disabilities or who are ESL) are similar to those of their typically-developing peers. The purpose of this study was to examine the teacher language in preschool classrooms representing a high level of diversity and children's social behavior.

Subjects were 91 children (43 girls) ranging in age from 24 to 61 months (M = 42) attending one of six classrooms in an inclusive university based preschool. Thirteen percent (n =12) of the children received in-school services for a diagnosed disability. Fifteen percent (n = 14) of the children were designated as ESL, based upon parent response to the question, "What language do you and your child usually speak at home?" on a parent questionnaire. There were no children who were both ESL and had a disability; these two groups were exclusive of each other.

Data was collected during classroom observations. The rate of teacher-child interaction was calculated as the total number of verbal interactions each child experienced from teachers divided by the number of rounds (out of a possible 100) s/he was present. Content of teacher interaction was coded as the one category reflecting its dominant theme. Categories were derived from a modified Innes, Banspach and Woodman (1982) scale and included: caregiving, instruction, conversation, social

facilitation, play, and control. The teacher's affective tone during the exchange was coded as positive (i.e., warm and friendly), negative (i.e., hostile or irritable), or neutral (flat or inexpressive). Child response was coded as ignore, negative, positive, and passive. A series of one-way analyses of variance were run to examine differences in the language experiences of ESL versus English-speaking children and for children with versus those without disabilities.

Results indicated that teachers had significantly fewer ($\rho < .03$) transactional interactions with ESL children ($M = 3.64$) than with English ($M = 28.38$) speaking children. Teachers had significantly fewer ($\rho < .01$) expressive interactions with ESL children ($M = 1.79$) than with English ($M = 20.88$) speaking children. Teachers used significantly less positive affect ($\rho < .03$) when interacting with ESL children ($M = 5.23$) as compared with English ($M = 40.70$) speaking children. ESL children ($M = 3.51$) gave significantly fewer ($\rho < .025$) positive child responses than English ($M = 30.57$) speaking children.

The presence of a disability had an effect upon the type of interaction between teachers and children. Teachers had significantly fewer ($\rho < .03$) one-way interactions with children with disabilities ($M = 4.08$) compared with typical children ($M = 18.10$). Children with disabilities ($M = 1.18$) ignored significantly fewer ($\rho < .02$) initiations than children without disabilities ($M = 5.32$).

This study found experiences were different for children based upon their native language and the presence of a disability. Children with disabilities had few differences in their language experience. Formal supports and teacher training appeared to compensate for limited language when a disability was present, however that did not

happen for ESL children. This may be a result of supports that are present for children with disabilities in the form of laws (PL99-457), funding, IEP's, special educators, and therapists. Formal teacher training and awareness are greater for working with children with disabilities.

The role of language is central to the successful inclusion of diverse groups of children. Therefore, a need exists for enhanced teacher training and support for working with ESL children. These findings provide a basis for further study of the impact of language and disability upon the educational experience of young children.

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